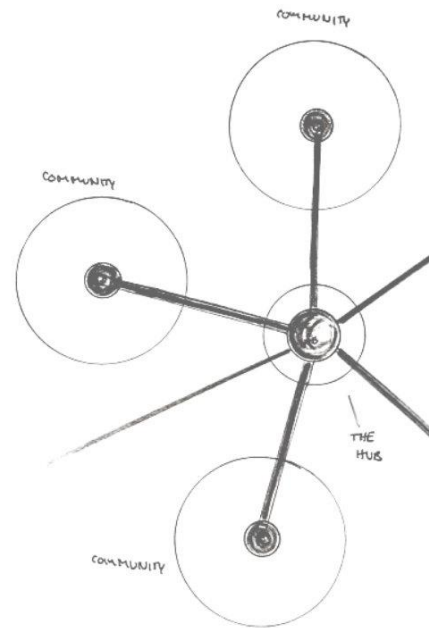
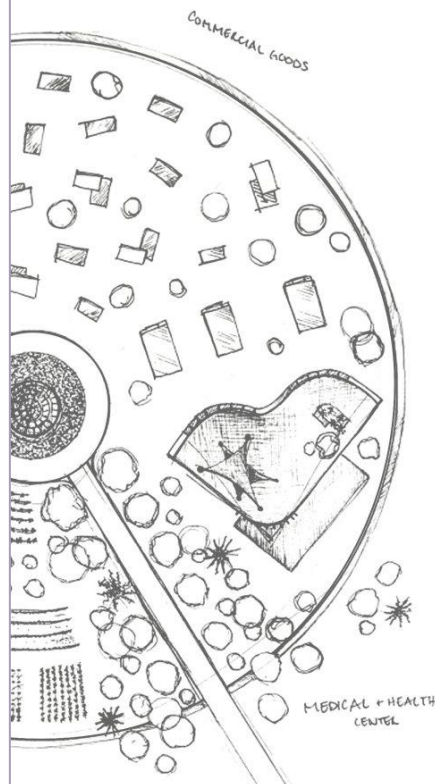


Section excerpted from:

INSIGHTS

4th-Year Students' Reflections on
Design for Social Innovation



Edited by Chiara Del Gaudio

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Design Thinking for Promoting Social Innovation in Small Businesses

DESIGN THINKING - SOCIAL INNOVATION - SMALL BUSINESSES

Most businesses have monetary goals. In other words, the main goals of people who intend to open a new business are mostly focused on making profits out of that business. However, today people are more concerned with making a positive impact on the planet than making more money (Fox, 2016). Therefore, in order for a business to thrive in today's economy, it would be best for businesses to be socially, culturally or environmentally sustainable. As such, what are the possible ways and processes according to which a business model can work within such frameworks? This is where the notions of design thinking and social innovation come in. What are they and how can small socio-culturally or environmentally sustainable businesses profit from them? This paper aims to investigate the contribution of design thinking in sustaining social innovation in small businesses. First, we briefly describe what design thinking and social innovation are and second, we try to prove that design thinking is the best possible way for promoting social innovation in small businesses.

Design Thinking and Social Innovation

Tim Brown, CEO of Innovation Design Engineering Organization (IDEO), defines *design thinking* as a "human-centred approach to innovation that draws from the designer's toolkit to integrate people's needs, technology possibilities, and business success" requirements (Brown, n.d.). According to this definition, design thinking is not only a tool for designers, but it can be applied in any field and can be learned by anyone. One of the fine things in learning design thinking is that it teaches people how to empathize with the user. Moreover, it is a human-centred approach that promotes an iterative process where designers carry out the design

process with the help of the various stakeholders involved (Leverenz, 2014). The idea that users can be involved in the design process of a business model is a central purpose of this paper because it helps connect the idea of design thinking to social innovation. One of the most comprehensive definitions of social innovation comes from Jegou and Manzini, who define social innovation as changes in the way individuals or communities act to solve a problem or to generate new opportunities. These innovations are driven more by changes in behaviour than by changes in technology or the market and they typically emerge from bottom-up rather than top-down processes (Jégou & Manzini, 2008, p.29).

According to this definition, we notice the relevance of the user. These authors no longer consider users as a consumer but as a central actor of the development process itself.

Carlington Booch

The example described here is taken from the Centre for Social Enterprise Development (CSED) website (Murr, 2019) and presented here to illustrate social innovation in small businesses. Carlington Booch is a social enterprise that is located in Ottawa, Canada. The company brews small-batch kombucha (fermented tea) to help fight addiction in Ottawa. Its goal is to reinvigorate the community by changing the way people live to create healthier people and healthier communities. It provides employment and volunteer opportunities for people coming out of addiction treatment centres. They also donate a portion of bottles sold to fight addiction in the community. According to the business owner, he has gone through drug addiction himself. The business was built with the help of CSED in Ottawa. The owner created

a change in order to solve a problem in society and generate new opportunities for people coming out of addiction. This change, itself contributes to the understanding that social innovation is based on individuals who act to solve a problem.

What we learn from studying Carlington Booch is that: a) continuous learning from the user's past experience is important in adopting design thinking to promote social innovation in small businesses. The owner (the user) of Carlington Booch was an ex-drug addict. He knew what it was like to be an addict when he had an idea about starting a business to help eradicate drug addiction. His past experience helped CSED to come up with a business idea. Since design thinking revolves around user-centredness, giving the user the opportunity to express his or her ideas and feelings about a problem will help

designers come up with innovative social ideas; b) business owners who have learned about design thinking can understand the user needs better because they have learned how to empathize. This helps to create a business that is not only profitable but socially sustainable. In order to achieve these understandings, two activities were performed: the study of CSED development phases for social enterprises such as visions for creating a business, idea generation, feasibility studies, business planning and performance measurement; and then the comparison of those development phases to design thinking phases such as define, ideate, prototype and test. However, more research and studies need to be done about the implementation of CSED principles when helping locals to create social enterprises in Ottawa.



Illustration: The above illustration is an analogy between process of brewing kombucha and creating a sustainable business.

“Business owners who have learned about design thinking can understand the user needs better because they have learned how to empathize.”

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